

MONOPOLIZATION OF EDUCATION: NATIONALIZATION OF CHURCH SCHOOLS IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

After World War II, in Hungary the caretaker government formed as a result of the coalition of left-wing and bourgeois parties created the slogan 'Free state, free church'. The political power promised the churches unrestricted operation, not only in the field of religious life, but also in fulfilling various social functions. However, the consolidating left-wing made efforts to take over control right from the beginning. The left-wing forces, especially the Hungarian communist party forming the government regarded the churches to be their dangerous opponents as they had wide-ranging social influence. The left-wing has done everything to reduce the churches' far-reaching social influence. The communist party (in secret), was already busy with preparing the consolidation of monocacy. It regarded the churches as serious rivals not only ideologically, but also from the point of view of the monopolization of ruling. Churches had far-reaching social connections. They were present in almost every villages, towns, and cities. Denominational schools comprised one of the important elements of the churches' connections. Consequently, the left-wing first of all wanted to acquire church schools. The government kept explaining the public that school nationalization was implemented for the sake of progress and democracy. The communist party considered this school matter as a question of power. Left-wing forces made efforts to gain influence over society to the highest possible extent. They also wanted to control the formulation of the growing generation's thoughts and view of life. Consequently, acquiring the schools was an important step on the way of expropriating political power.

Keywords: church schools, nationalization of education, social influence, press and propaganda

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the 20th century churches played very important role in social life of Hungary. The so-called historical churches (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Calvinist, Lutheran, Unitarian – and the Israelite or Jewish until 1942) had serious authority and a great influence in public life. Churches had a major part in social nursing and public education. Churches operated two third of the elementary (primary) schools. In the school year of 1946, out of 7016 schools 4278 primary schools were sponsored by churches. Most of the primary schools (63% of the schools) were operated by the Roman Catholic Church, in line with the confessional distribution of the population. In addition to the primary schools, churches also had several vocational schools, grammar schools and teacher trainer colleges. Church schools generally had high prestige. Even not religious parents often enrolled their children in church schools, despite there were a state-owned or village public school nearby. Parents expected high standard education and fastidious ethic tuition from

church schools. The Hungarian society was not religious to such an extent and was not bonded so closely to the church as e.g. the Polish. However, priests and teachers were well respected, and especially at the countryside, had high prestige [1].

POLITICAL FIGHT FOR THE CHURCH SCHOOLS

Debate about Church Schools

On behalf of the left-wing parties, there was a political attack going on against the churches right from the very beginning. During the land reform in 1945, most of the churches' lands were expropriated and portioned out. With this the churches were deprived of one of their most important sources of revenue. Land expropriation especially hit home the Catholic Church. The loss of assets that occurred as a result of the land reform made it difficult to maintain the denominational schools and to fulfil the educational tasks. The organs of the ministry of home affairs being controlled by the communist party kept dissolving the church organisations, the social clubs, the youth clubs, and the cultural associations, and commenced actions against clergymen. They generally referred to the fact that the ethos of these associations and clubs and clergymen were closely related to the former right-wing, conservative, authoritarian system, which they wanted to restore. For example, the scout movement fell a prey to such a political measure [2].

The power significantly restricted the operation of any church media and church press. In the previous Horthy era, i.e. in the 1930-ies, approximately 177 different church printed matters were published: daily and weekly papers, journals focusing on religious and social questions, and other periodicals. After World War II, in 1947, there were only 39 types of church publications issued, and the number of copies declined to its one tenth as compared to the earlier number of copies. Some publishers and journalists emigrated and there were political procedures going on against others. The churches' loss of assets made it difficult to finance the publications. The authorities did not permit the churches to publish public daily papers. The reasoning behind this was that the churches were not in charge of discussing daily political questions, participating in public debates, or presenting particular social interests. There was no room for the churches on the stage of politics; they needed to cut themselves adrift from the topical public efforts. But these were excuses only. Left-wing forces made efforts to exclude churches from continuous public communication, because they regarded the churches to be the strongest support for the bourgeois parties [3].

At the parliamentary elections in 1945, the communists did not achieve the expected support from the society; they got only 17% of the votes. As a consequence, the party avoided large scale open conflicts with the churches. It did not want to appear in an anti-religious and anticlerical role. Especially in the countryside, where most of the people were religious, it did not want to antagonize the inhabitants. Instead of a front attack, it rather made efforts to give umbrage to the churches, to undermine the authenticity of the denominations' activities and respected personalities. The communist press played a crucial role in it. The party utilised its valuable media positions and had a comprehensive campaign in order to discredit the

churches. In the lack of appropriate media tools, the different denominations could counterbalance it with less and less efficiency [4].

In spring 1947, the communist party decided that the time had come to commence a concentrated attack against the teaching activity of the churches. The first step was to aim at stopping catechesis being compulsory, i.e. making religious education optional. However, it did not espouse this idea openly, as it did not assume enough support from the society. Other coalition parties also had left-wing groups that accepted the communist standpoint in many questions. The communist party left initiation to them with regard to optional religious education. The action was started by the left-wing of the election winner Independent Smallholders Party. By accepting Gyula Ortutay's proposal, the leaders of the Smallholders Party made a statement on their meeting on 28 February 1947 that teaching religious education should be optional. The Independent Smallholders Party was in a difficult political situation. The left-wing parties were making a concerted campaign against it. The leaders of the Smallholders Party expected that after the peace treaty ratification the Soviet army would leave Hungary and the communist party could be up-staged without its support. But until that time they exerted to meet the communists' requirements in order to reduce the left-wing's political pressure on the smallholders' party [5].

It was the Catholic Church the hardest hit by the plan of cancelling compulsory catechesis. The prelacy, headed by József Mindszenty archbishop of Esztergom, categorically countered this idea. In their opinion, with optional catechesis the parents' momentary mood, external effects, or political pressure would determine, whether the child got religious education. While there was a superior will and the church's 1000 years of experience behind compulsory religious education. It was clear to the catholic prelacy that from the left-wing political forces it could expect attacks graver than before. It did not want to see that communists presented it to the people as the representative of the former regime. Consequently, it tried to define that its opposition was not of political nature. It accepted all the democratic measures, even the land reform, though it was disadvantageous for itself. It insisted on the churches' independent operation, including religious education in church schools [6].

On behalf of the Calvinistic Church, László Ravasz bishop rejected administrative cancellation of compulsory religious education. He recalled that earlier compulsory religious education was not problematic for parents in church schools. The leading bodies of the Calvinistic Church also protested against government intervention in an official statement. The smallholder Prime Minister and the President (both Calvinists) tried to convince the leaders of their church in vain no to act openly against the left-wing's intents. The Calvinistic newspapers – with low profile, but unambiguously – rejected the government's intent to make religious education optional. In his declarations published, Lajos Ordass Lutheran bishop called the readers' attention to the fact that neither the church, nor the religious parents should reply to the attacks of the left-wing forces by political type of enouncements. He recalled the behaviour of the Norwegian Lutheran Church during World War II. When the Norwegian government collaborating with the Germans wanted to force students into a national-socialist youth organisation, the Norwegian

church mobilised people against it not on political grounds, but by referring to the parents' right gained from God [7].

Despite all protests, on 4 March, at the inter-party committee meeting, Mátyás Rákosi, secretary general of the Communist Party declared that it was inevitable to implement the monopolisation of course book publication and the introduction of optional catechesis, and later on the nationalisation of schools would be placed on the agenda, too. On 17 March, Gyula Ortutay, who raised this question first, was nominated to the minister of religion and public education. The new minister mentioned already in his first declarations that he was about to issue a governmental decree on the introduction of optional catechesis [8].

In March 1947, based on the initiative of the Catholics the churches started a nation-wide protest movement. The church mobilised the surviving non-governmental organisations and called them to protest against the cancellation of compulsory catechesis. There were M.P. interpellations in the Parliament. Church institutions, teaching staffs, religious parent organisations, and student associations flooded the government and the local municipalities with applications, and protesting letters. On 19 and 20 March there were student demonstrations in several cities. In Szeged 3000 students marched to the county school-inspectorate. Reformed churches also joined the Catholic Church's protest. In Calvinistic and Lutheran schools catechesis being optional was much less problematic, because several parents had already applied for exemption from religious education for their children. They would have continued this practice. However, they categorically rejected the government's one-sided, outrageous solution, which regulated this question in a simple decree of the minister, by bypassing the Parliament. Furthermore, they rejected the clause of the draft, according to which later on parents would need to apply for teaching religious education to their children within the frames of an administrative procedure [9].

In the movement initiated by the churches, the Religious Association of Catholic Parents had an outstanding role. In 1947, it had already more than 2000 member organisations. As a result of their successful operation, similar associations were established near other denominations, too. On 22 April 1947 the Association of the Friends of Calvinistic Schools was established. Although the government disfavoured the social protest against the introduction of optional catechesis, it clearly recognised that if it wanted to be successful against the churches, it needed to prepare the action much better and it must bring round at least one part of the parents, too. Having experienced the inhabitants' indignation and protest, in summer 1947 the communist party put this question aside. Early elections were announced for August. The Hungarian Communist Party did not want to turn religious people comprising a major part of the population against itself. It charged the smallholders party with the idea of optional religious education, and publicly criticised the leaders of the Independent Smallholders Party, because it submitted a proposal raising such a social tension [10].

Nationalisation of Church Schools

The communist party won the elections in 1947. This accelerated the preparation for the takeover. The Soviet politics had also changed as the cold war deepened. The leaders in Moscow urged the Eastern European communist parties to get even with their political opponents as soon as possible. Starting action against church schools was put on the agenda at the beginning of 1948 again. But it was not only on religious education, but also on the nationalisation of church schools. The question of nationalisation by communist party was presented as the opposite of old and new thinking, the fight between reaction and progress. It was emphasised that state financing of schools would guarantee the unification and increase of the standard, continuous course book supply, avoid the lack of teachers, and ensure real equality of chances to each Hungarian school child. Those who were against it were the enemies of not only nationalisation, but also democracy and progress [4].

The reformed churches were not averse to negotiations. They were ready to some compromises in order to decrease the tension between the state and the churches. It was rejected, however, that the state could dictate one-sidedly in this question and get full control over the churches' activities. On 8 April, the president had a meeting with the heads of the Calvinistic Church. Here László Ravasz outlined that they support each and every important economic and social endeavours of the peoples' democracy. However, they rejected the schools' full nationalisation. But it turned out that the communist party had been preparing behind the scenes the bishop's deposal, so that they could have a successor, who agreed to the left-wing's endeavours without opposition [5].

The communist party thoroughly prepared the campaign started for the nationalisation of schools. It endeavoured to decrease the opposition of the churches and the religious parents with various promises. It announced that compulsory catechesis would be maintained even in the nationalised schools. They would keep on employing the teachers who taught there earlier, as well as the clergymen. Ideological variegation would remain even after the nationalisation, and left-wing ideologies would not be forced. The purpose of the measures accompanying nationalisation was also to increase trust and weaken opposition. During the summer they raised teacher salaries. Spectacular renovations started in the first schools taken over. Clergymen were induced to make positive declarations in press articles about nationalisation. Left-wing non-governmental organisations were mobilised and local administrative bodies were instructed to request the nationalisation of church schools from the government on meetings and in resolutions. It also had an important tactical role that the draft of school nationalisation was put forward in the Parliament during the summer. Since there were holidays in the schools, churches could not mobilise the teacher and student organisations, and the parents. Consequently, there were much less social demonstration, opposition was not synchronised and did not include great masses [11].

Although the government had made a decision on this question, it initiated new negotiations with the churches in order to maintain the show. Ortutay emphasised his attempts to come to an agreement with the denominations, but he also stated that the

government would suppress opposition to democratic efforts. Mindszenty archbishop was not ready to make any compromise concerning the schools. He set as a prerequisite of the negotiations that the government should permit again the operation of the dissolved church organisations, and allow the start-up of church daily papers. It was not by accident that the head of the Catholic Church especially insisted on these conditions. The organising and mobilising work of the social clubs and the extension of the media opportunities would have strengthened the church's connections with the mass significantly. In this way it could have counterbalanced much better the pressure of the left-wing government [8].

On 11 May 1948, the catholic prelaty issued a pastoral letter against the schools' planned nationalisation. Having accepted Mindszenty archbishop's proposal, the declaration promised church chastisement and banishment from the churches to the ones who voluntarily or under pressure supported nationalisation. The government used the opportunity to accuse the church of coercion and threatening. On 15 May, Ortutay declared that he endeavoured to solve the matter of schools by way of negotiations. However, the church did not intend to co-operate; each logical proposal was rejected. The Catholic Church reacted in a bishop's pastoral letter on 23 May, where it rejected the charge of being anti-democratic. It objected to the aggressive propaganda of the left-wing, and accusations having no foundation. It outlined that church schools provably provided students with appropriate training [12].

The government in addition to convincing also applied the tools of threatening. In a village called Pócspetri, in the evening on 3 June, the local national committee held a meeting, and it made a declaration supporting church school nationalisation. Approx. 500 people coming from the litany gathered in front of the village hall. These people requested that the leaders of the village did not support the nationalisation. A scuffle started among the people and the policemen protecting the village hall. In the meantime the arms of one of the policemen went off and its owner received a mortal hurt. Although it was evidently an unavoidable accident, the communist controlled police reported this case as a wilful murder, a political attempt on someone's life. The court it came to the conclusion that the local priest incited rebellion and the people attacked the police as a result of this. Although there was no evidence for any of the charges, in the left-wing press exaggerated articles were published, which accused the church of having anti-democratic behaviour, and instigation to bloody terror acts [8].

The Parliament discussed the bill on school nationalisation on 16 June 1948. Those who submitted the bill emphasised that public education had already been owned by the state for long in each European developed country. They also recalled that nationalisation had already been included in program of Lajos Kossuth and József Eötvös a hundred years ago. They outlined that only unified state education could ensure proper standard and equal chances. And they referred to the nationalisation was initiated by different non-governmental organisations. The bill was passed by the Parliament in the ratio of 230:63. With this 6505 denominational schools were taken over by the state (5437 primary schools, 113 grammar schools, 98 teacher training college, and lyceum), and 18 000 teachers became employed by the state. Nationalised schools included 63% Roman Catholic, 24% Calvinist, and 8% Lutheran schools [10].

Having seen the government's determination, on 12 June, Mindszenty archbishop prohibited the priest and monk teachers to teach in schools taken over by the state. As a result of his order, out of 2000 monks only 15 agreed to continue teaching. The archbishop aimed at achieving that everybody could see clearly, how crucial the church's role was in education. But in practice he only made it easier for the communist party to get rid of the old teaching staff. When this law passed, the Catholic Church lost its fight against school nationalisation. It did not have proper tools to fight efficiently, to mobilise great numbers of people. Democratic institutions already did not work properly, either. Left-wing helped along nationalisation of schools. Organised opposition stopped after the act of nationalisation entered into force. The Catholic Church did not want to have constant conflict with the ruling power. It acknowledged that it lost its schools. It focused on the remaining social activities and the operation of the church organisation [1].

In the case of the reformed churches that had much less social influence as compared to the Catholic Church, the intent of nationalisation met with less resistance. But the communist party left nothing to chance. The most reputed head of the Calvinistic Church, László Ravasz bishop was forced to withdraw in April 1948. The government promised that the Calvinists might keep some schools. As a result, the church synod passed the nationalisation plan on 15 June. But one month later the government decided that despite its promise each Calvinistic primary school would be taken over by the state. The leaders of the Lutheran Church that comprised only a few percent of the population tried to avoid open confrontation. He hoped that if the church co-operated, (according to the state's promises) compulsory catechesis would remain, church teachers would be employed, and the social institutions of the denomination would not be taken over. In the issued pastoral letters they asked their members to be cautious and thoughtful, not to give rise to aggressive responses from the ruling power. However the leaders of the Lutheran Church did not trust in the government's promises. Therefore during the summer it did not decide on co-operation [8].

Left-wing forces lost their patience. In September, Béla Kapi Calvinist bishop was forced to withdraw from his post, while Lajos Ordass Lutheran bishop was arrested and convicted based on trumped-up charges. In order to crush Catholic Church definitely, on 23 December 1948 József Mindszenty was also arrested and convicted based on trumped-up charges. During the school nationalisation one of the government's greatest promises was that catechesis would remain compulsory. But the ruling power did not keep this promise either. On 6 September 1949, a governmental decree changed religious education optional. According to explanation of the Communist Party the school nationalisation was implemented for the sake of progress, as opposed to the 'reactionary' behaviour represented by the churches. In fact, acquiring the schools was an important step to the left-wing on the way of expropriating political power [13].

CONCLUSION

School nationalisation was not about modifying property relations. Its purpose was evidently not the modernisation of education, or the introduction of unified

requirements. Left-wing forces made efforts to gain influence over society to the highest possible extent. They also wanted to control the formulation of the growing generation's thoughts and view of life. That was why they forced the quickest possible implementation of nationalisation. Media played a very important role in the campaign launched for the sake of taking the schools over by the state. Left-wing parties were very efficient in exploiting their various communicational opportunities. They were successful in manipulating and tuning most of the public opinion to their views. They could also succeed in making a lot of people uncertain or turn against the churches. For the churches it was a significant disadvantage that they did not have similar media tools. In the lack of this, they could not provide the inhabitants with authentic information. They could not mobilise people to the proper extent as opposed to the power gaining endeavours of the left-wing, for protecting the independence of church schools.

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